

# **Saudi Security: Increasing Challenges alongside Strategic Limitations**

**Yoel Guzansky and Tomer Barak** | August 24, 2021

**In recent years the threats facing Saudi Arabia have intensified, and they have seen significant changes. A noticeable increase in kinetic threats (scope and precision) and in cyber threats to strategic assets is evident, and in particular Riyadh faces a threat to the functional continuity of its oil facilities and freedom of navigation. These looming threats are ominous for the Saudi economy and damage the kingdom's standing; should they intensify further, security could be undermined, and in extreme scenarios, national stability and the stability of the royal house itself. This trend has four main sources: Saudi Arabia's adversaries are winning the arms race and are capable of attacking it more easily than in the past; Iran has displayed increasing audacity in its actions in the region, exposing the weakness of the Gulf and American deterrence; there has been a regression in the willingness of Riyadh's traditional supporters – the United States, Pakistan, and Arab countries – to guarantee its security; and an assertive policy by Riyadh has generated increased criticism. All these enhance the potential threat in the domestic arena, at the borders, and from across the borders.**

## **The Geography of the Threats: Saudi Arabia Encircled**

Geographically, Saudi Arabia has a large number of fronts and long and porous borders, and as such, the kingdom's security forces must cope simultaneously with a large number of threat areas. Of the kingdom's 4,415 kilometers of borders, in addition to its 2,640 kilometer coastline, few segments allow a strong sense of security. Given that the Persian Gulf is a strategic shipping lane for the kingdom's oil exports en route to Asia, and home to its oil and gas reservoirs, the Gulf itself is at least as sensitive if not more so than any point along the land border. Even on Saudi Arabia's borders with friendly Gulf states, there is a constant concern of scenarios that could bring a Shiite, pro-Iranian regime to power without sufficient warning.

- a. *The Iranian threat:* Iran is the main threat for Saudi Arabia, and for many years the two countries have been engaged in conflict in several arenas. Saudi Arabia fights against the Houthis in Yemen, who receive considerable Iranian assistance; Saudi oil facilities and oil tankers have been attacked several times by Iran and its proxies; frequent cyberattacks are carried out against the kingdom; and there are concerns of subversive Iranian activity among the local Shiite population. In addition, the Iranian presence in Iraq increases the Saudi leadership's sense that for the first time, the kingdom is in effect "encircled" on all sides by Iran. In addition, the Iranian nuclear program and its implications for Iranian freedom of operation in the region are a source of concern. Iran has already proved its willingness to act against Saudi and Gulf interests in the region – attacks on oil tankers, disruption of maritime activity, and the attack against the bottlenecks of Saudi oil production in September 2019 at Abqaiq, and again in March 2021 at Ras Tanura. Mortified, and conscious of their vulnerability and their inferiority to Iran, the Saudis did not directly blame Iran, but they have recognized the need to ensure their security on their own, while understanding that they have few ways of responding to such an attack.
  
- b. *The threat from Yemen:* During six years of war, the Houthis succeeded in carrying out a large number of border-penetrating operations in Saudi territory, taking captives and embarrassing the Saudi army, which is equipped with the best Western weapons. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in maintaining the long border and preventing large-scale ground operations deep into its territory. The main threat from the Yemeni border is an aerial threat, reflected in ongoing high-trajectory fire over the years toward towns and cities in the border region and toward targets in the area that include airports, oil facilities, and symbols of government. From time to time, military, economic, and civilian targets deep in Saudi Arabia are fired on. In the maritime sector near Yemen, the Houthis have proven their ability to strike oil tankers in the Red Sea region and even to attack vessels near the ports of [Jeddah and Yanbu](#).
  
- c. *The threat from Iraq:* Iraq poses a double threat to Saudi Arabia. First, in Iraq there are many pro-Iranian militias that could turn against Saudi Arabia when given the command. Second, radical Sunni elements, remnants of ISIS, could infiltrate via the long land border and carry out attacks against Saudi targets. The Jordanian border also poses a similar challenge regarding infiltration of hostile elements and weapons into the kingdom.

- d. *The internal arena*: Additional risk factors are located in the kingdom among embittered populations, security forces, and even within the royal family itself. The rapid changes that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has advanced accelerate internal tensions, which increase the risks of subversion and foreign influence within the kingdom.
- e. *Israel*: Israel figures low in Saudi's threat perception, and it appears that Saudi Arabia does not see it as a relevant reference threat for military buildup.

### **Competition over Military Superiority and the Limitations of Saudi Military Capabilities**

The most substantive threat that Saudi Arabia currently faces is a large-scale precision missile and UAV attack that would damage oil facilities and essential infrastructure – desalination facilities and electricity production. The potential threat is relevant in four aspects: a simultaneous attack on several fronts across Saudi territory; proven precision capability, in particular against static strategic facilities of known location; lapses in alerts of sudden attacks; and intelligence and operational penetration.

Iran has the largest arsenal in the Middle East of cruise missiles, surface-to-surface missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles that cover all of Saudi territory, including strategic facilities on the coast of the Red Sea. Improved precision and range, increases in lethality, and Iran's ability to launch from several arenas (Iran, Iraq, Yemen) all pose a substantial difficulty for Saudi air defense capabilities. In practice, in recent years Saudi Arabia has been attacked from three fronts (albeit not simultaneously), and Iranian precision capabilities were demonstrated in the strikes on the Aramco facilities in Abqaiq. In order to reach this level of precision, Iran needed a target list and high-quality intelligence (prior and in real time). Hence, it seems that within the kingdom's territory, Saudi Arabia is open to Iranian intelligence gathering activity.

Despite the large amount of money invested in Saudi defense systems, in particular the acquisition of the most advanced Western technology (PAC-3 Patriot batteries, THAAD systems), Riyadh has had difficulty coping with heavy barrages and would certainly have difficulty thwarting a simultaneous large-scale attack from several fronts. This raises the question of the kingdom's ability to provide sufficient warning of a sudden attack, especially if sensitive intelligence information is not transferred by the United States in real time.

Another military weakness is Saudi Arabia's limited naval capabilities. Even though the shipping lanes through the Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab Straits are an essential lifeline for the kingdom, in this arena too it is inferior to Iran. Iran for its part makes extensive use of asymmetric tactics such as a "swarm" of dozens of small and fast vessels that attack suddenly, anti-ship missiles, and massive mining of the Gulf region. In addition, in the Red Sea arena the Houthis make extensive use of naval mines and integrated attacks by unmanned vehicles (UAVs and unmanned surface vehicles). The cooperation between Iran and the Houthis in the naval dimension is also expressed in the presence of Iranian spy ships in the southern Red Sea (previously the *Saviz* until it was hit, and now the [Behshad](#)).

In contrast, the Saudi navy is relatively small and obsolete, and is built to contend with symmetric navies, in particular in the Gulf. At the same time, it is developing capabilities in its eastern maritime front as part of the SNEP2 deal (Saudi Naval Expansion Program; a plan for the modernization of the kingdom's navy valued at over \$20 billion). This military buildup does not match the development of the threats stemming from fast, low-signature vessels. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's naval capabilities in the Red Sea are significantly lower, and with respect to the expansion of the threat from the Houthis and Iran in the naval arena, Saudi Arabia has the weaker hand.

On land, the limitations that the Saudi army confronts include a relatively small number of personnel, built-in mismanagement of resources, a lack of technology infrastructure, and deep gaps in command capabilities. The land army's difficulties have been expressed in dozens of incidents at the border with Yemen and in the losses that it has suffered over the years. These limitations are in stark contrast with the enormous amount of resources that the kingdom invests in its defense.

The kingdom's dependence on oil profits in order to cover most of its expenses also affects its ability to manage a multi-year defense budget and to meet its defense and military buildup objectives. For example, during the four years before Saudi involvement in Yemen began (2015), the kingdom's security expenditure grew by 63 percent. However, in 2020, for the first time since the outbreak of the war in Yemen, there was a [37 percent](#) decline in the total amount of investment in security, apparently due to the decline in oil prices and resources demanded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the kingdom's security expenses were \$57.5 billion in 2020, 10 percent less than in 2019. Nonetheless, the kingdom remained the largest weapons importer in the world, with about [11 percent](#) of all of the weapons produced in the world intended for the Saudi

market (80 percent of these weapons came from the United States, 10 percent from the UK, and the rest from other suppliers).

### **The Cyber Dimension**

Not surprisingly, very little official information about cyber threats to the kingdom is made public. At the same time, it appears that Saudi Arabia is one of the countries in the world most frequently targeted by cyberattacks, with Saudi IT infrastructure under regular attacks by hostile elements. Iran is thought to be the source of the majority of the attacks, which focus on electricity, energy, water, and desalination infrastructure and symbols of government.

It is evident that Saudi Arabia is investing considerable effort and money in developing tools and doctrines for coping with the increasing threat in the cyber dimension, although it seems that this is Saudi Arabia's soft underbelly. The royal family understands the risks and opportunities inherent in this dimension and is working on developing a cybernetic strategy. However, internal factors challenge this effort, first and foremost, the inherent division within the Saudi government. The relevant powers are divided among many power centers that belong to different ministries and bodies, and this situation makes it difficult to formulate and implement a uniform cyber policy that can address the kingdom's diverse security needs.

A related impediment is the relative technological weakness of Saudi society. This problem, not unique to the cyber issue, reflects the weakness of the kingdom, which still lacks the necessary human and technological infrastructure for advanced capabilities. The information technology industry makes up only 0.4 percent of Saudi Arabia's GDP, and the kingdom relies mainly on external assistance for civilian needs related to the cybernetic dimension.

### **Consolidating Independent Strategic Capability?**

The Saudi understanding of the substantial military gaps and the depth of the threats that it must cope with, along with the weakened American support and the shortened time to an Iranian military nuclear breakout, could accelerate the Saudi leadership's thinking about advancing independent military nuclear capabilities as a new means of deterrence in the arsenal against Iranian activity.

Saudi Arabia's interest in the nuclear realm is not new, nor is the concern that under certain circumstances and conditions, Riyadh could pursue a military nuclear course. Senior leaders in the kingdom have referred to the issue on more than one occasion and have stated that the kingdom will acquire nuclear

capability if Iran does so ([Mohammed bin Salman, 2018](#)), and that the kingdom seeks control over all of the components of the nuclear fuel cycle ([Abdulaziz bin Salman, 2019](#)).

In addition, while the scientific-technological infrastructure in the nuclear field in Saudi Arabia is limited and it is subject to heavy international pressure, the kingdom has a history of hiding various activities in strategic military fields, in particular in the field of surface-to-surface missiles, and it is not inconceivable that today as well it is concealing activity in the military strategic field. It is doubtful that the international community, including the IAEA, has the ability to identify prohibited activity on a small scale, especially under the conditions that characterize the kingdom. Furthermore, the 2015 nuclear deal did not decrease Saudi Arabia's motivation to acquire nuclear capability, but rather just seems to have temporarily reduced the urgency of the issue. The ongoing erosion of Iran's commitments to the agreement's clauses and the shortening of the breakout time could, once again, spur the Saudi leadership – especially under the influence of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman – to move more quickly toward achieving nuclear capability, including through possible "shortcuts," meaning acquiring it "off the shelf" from sources in Pakistan and/or North Korea, for example.

### **United States – Saudi Arabia – China**

Despite the uncertainty that currently surrounds the future of relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia, the assessment is that the Biden administration's policy at the beginning of his term regarding "[recalibrating](#)" relations with Saudi Arabia does not aim at a deterioration of relations but rather reflects a desire to shape relations in a configuration that will suit it and enable it to continue the bilateral strategic partnership. In the administration's view, a [practical approach](#) by the two sides that takes into account each side's interests is what will enable maintaining the mutual relationship. It is also clear to the administration that its relations with the Saudis have a direct impact on the US ability to fulfill its objectives in the Middle East, including coping with Iran's confrontational activity in the region, ending the war in Yemen, and maintaining the stability of the global energy market.

Saudi Arabia recognizes that despite [doubts](#) regarding the United States commitment to its security, there is no substitute for the American military presence in the Gulf as a curb on Iranian aggression and there is no substitute for American (and European) military technology.. However, Riyadh is interested in diversifying its sources of support in order not to end up in a position of

complete dependence on the United States, in particular systems restricted by the United States for acquisition (such as attack UAVs and offensive cyber capabilities). Therefore, Saudi Arabia is also working to develop relations with competing great powers and weapons suppliers. As it appears increasingly that the US is intent on reducing its involvement in the region, Washington must take into account that its adversaries, including China, will exploit this in order to deepen their involvement. On the other hand, the scope of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China is a function of the depth of American pressure. As this intensifies, it will become [more difficult](#) for the United States partners in the Middle East to deepen their connections with China.

And indeed, in accordance with China's increasing interest in the Gulf, it seems that Washington is not reluctant to place public pressure on countries in the region, because [it sees](#) certain aspects of cooperation between them and China as damaging to American national security. Saudi Arabia [is aware](#) of the [increasing](#) American sensitivity regarding China, and is interested in avoiding entanglement in a confrontation between the great powers. However, Washington's decision not to provide it with certain technological-military components produced in the US could lead it to acquire them from China. For its part, China [is signaling](#) that it would like to strengthen the strategic cooperation with Saudi Arabia – with which it cooperates on the nuclear issue (in this field, it appears that there is more than meets the eye). Similar to Saudi Arabia's interest in China, Riyadh is not hesitant about engaging in military discourse and also acquiring weapons (as long as there is no possible alternative in the Western market) from other problematic actors, including North Korea. It does so out of a lack of alternatives and out of the assessment that even if its actions are discovered, it will be able to recant and smooth things over with the United States, based on the many shared interests.

### **Conclusion: Return to Traditional Modes of Influence**

Until 2015, when it launched Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen, Saudi Arabia refrained from leading significant military actions, and at most it participated in regional coalitions (helping the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] stabilize the Bahraini regime in 2011; participating in the international coalition against ISIS). This policy was based on an understanding of the limitations of power, and its ability to rely on the United States and its Arab partners for building coalitions. In addition, Saudi Arabia tried to maintain ongoing contact with potential threat sources, in order to prevent escalation through a combination of diplomacy and especially through its levers of economic influence.

However, the change in the White House's approach, both toward its ally Saudi Arabia and toward its adversary Iran, have accelerated Riyadh's adjustments to its foreign policy – at least externally and out of an intention to signal to the United States the importance of continuing the partnership. The negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Saudi economy are also in the background.

The adjustments in Saudi policy have included a willingness to reach a reconciliation agreement with Qatar (January 2021) and a well-publicized offer to the Houthis to sign a generous ceasefire agreement (not implemented in the end), and more recently, a dialogue with Iran. The [speech](#) on April 28, 2021 by Saudi Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman indicates adjustments in foreign policy toward Iran: "Iran is a neighboring country. All we ask for is to have a good and distinguished relationship with Iran...We want it to prosper and grow as we have Saudi interests in Iran, and they have Iranian interests in Saudi Arabia." This statement is diametrically opposed to previous claims by bin Salman against Iran, who even compared Iran's Supreme Leader to Hitler. These join a renewed conciliatory line towards the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the warming of relations with Iraq, and a honeymoon with Oman. It seems that in 2021 a certain change took place in the Saudi leadership's publicly declared policy: the assertive-militant line that the kingdom adopted during the previous decade, with the beginning of the regional upheaval, was set aside. The kingdom now seeks to manage conflicts and alleviate tensions, as much as it can, along with continuing its military buildup and effort to maintain relations with Washington under the Biden administration as well.

In the military dimension, in recent years Saudi Arabia has tried on several occasions to produce an independent military response to the security challenges before it, but the response has remained limited, amounting to the acquisition of showcase weapons and leveraging wealth and religious-diplomatic prestige to recruit partners for war. In order to improve capabilities, it must be capable of carrying out significant maneuvers of forces beyond its borders and withstanding attacks against population centers and essential infrastructure via missiles barrages, the disruption of shipping lanes, cyberattacks, or terrorist attacks and internal subversion.

Furthermore, the relatively limited manpower of the Saudi defense forces and doubts regarding their skills, along with significant technological disparities in the sea, air, and cyber realms, as well as the built-in division among various security bodies, place a question mark over Saudi Arabia's ability to wage a large-scale campaign, even in one arena. Moreover, the Saudi sense is that its traditional



strategic support is in doubt, given the process of the US withdrawal from the region, the recent disagreements with Pakistan, and the weakness of the GCC in recent years, along with the weakness of the Sunni camp as a whole. These circumstances fuel concerns that Saudi Arabia can be further challenged such that it will not oppose Iran's regional policy.

Developments in relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia are also expected to influence Israel and especially its interest in continuing the regional normalization trend – deepening the existing agreements with the Gulf states and adding additional countries to the process, first and foremost Saudi Arabia. There is great importance in maintaining the regional diplomatic and military front against Iran, in which Saudi Arabia is an important actor. Hence, Israel has a clear interest that the downgrading of relations between Washington and Riyadh be as minor and reversible as possible. At the same time, Israel is interested in restraining and setting boundaries for the Saudi Crown Prince to prevent diplomatic and military measures that would undermine regional stability and certainly those that are not coordinated with the relevant sides.

Israel must therefore convey to the US administration the possible consequences of the pressure placed on Riyadh and carefully and discreetly advocate on behalf of the Saudis, as overt Israeli identification with the kingdom in general and with bin Salman in particular, who is currently subject to harsh criticism, especially within the Democratic Party, could cause harm to the discourse between Jerusalem and Washington. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's use of its clear comparative advantages should not in itself threaten Israeli interests. Israel has a clear interest in maintaining the kingdom's stability and standing as part of consolidating the pragmatic Sunni camp in the region, which supports peace agreements with it and sees Iran as a threat to regional stability. If the kingdom can keep threats at bay without being seen as conciliatory and without granting Iran and the Shiite axis concessions in return for military quiet – Israel will also benefit.

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